

Fall 2016

A woman with long dark hair, wearing a black sleeveless dress and a wide-brimmed hat, stands on a stage. She is holding a small object in her hands and speaking into a microphone. The background shows an outdoor event with a crowd of people, tents, and buildings under a cloudy sky. The text "ACKNOWLEDGING WITSUWIT'EN TERRITORY" is overlaid in large white letters.

**ACKNOWLEDGING
WITSUWIT'EN
TERRITORY**

**A guide with information on the
Smithers Bridging Committee**

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Welcome! Danowh' yeh! (Come in, everyone!)

Welcome to Witsuwit'en territory! The Witsuwit'en have lived in this vast and bountiful river valley for thousands of years. Witsuwit'en ancestors knew this great watershed as *Widzin Kwah* (the name refers to a body of water larger than a stream, now known as the Bulkley River). The name Witsuwit'en is believed to mean "the people of the lower drainage" and the name of the valley in which Smithers is located is *D'ze Kant*, which means "foot of the mountain."

This area has only been known as the Bulkley Valley in recent history: about 150 years. The story of this beautiful valley is much older, spanning the thousands of generations that it was inhabited by *Niwhts'ide'ni*, the Witsuwit'en ancestors. Since time immemorial, this place has been called *yin tah*, a Witsuwit'en expression meaning "earth" or "land," but more specifically "territory."

When holding events on Witsuwit'en territory, it is customary to offer a traditional welcome that acknowledges the land and its inherent connection to Indigenous peoples' culture and ancestors. In this way, non-Aboriginals show respect for the region's history and build relationships for the future. This information booklet provides community event organizers with a better understanding of protocols around traditional welcomes. We hope it will join with the many ways we can create a better future together.

We are the land and the land is us

Witsuwit'en people see the land as a living, breathing being filled with spirit. Each being, large or small, has value. Animals, trees, and mountains, like humans, are alive with physical and spiritual power; every creature is an intelligent being to be learned from. Respect and understanding created harmonious relationships between the Witsuwit'en and the natural world.

Witsuwit'en people understand that they belong to the land and have a duty to protect it. There is no separation between humans and the natural world. Because of this, *yin tah*, or territory, is the memory of the Witsuwit'en people. Witsuwit'en ancestors that passed on are forever present, watching over the new generations of Witsuwit'en people.

Witsuwit'en people sustain themselves from the land. Their wisdom of the land was gathered from thousands of years of observation and experience studying geography, animals, plants, climate, and seasonal change. This traditional ecological knowledge is deeply rooted in respect and expressed in stories and rituals. Witsuwit'en *c'idede*, or teaching stories, focus on respectful relationships with animals and the spirit world and the disasters that can occur when we become careless with those relationships.

Witsuwit'en agreements with all creation precede language and are considered law. These laws include boundaries of responsibilities kept by clans and house systems. This is reflected in how they harvest, dispose of waste and use the territory, and even how they speak about and treat creatures. Today, this knowledge is still used to maintain the delicate balance between the human and animal worlds, to ensure that all would survive and prosper for generations to come.



Wet'suwet'en versus Witsuwit'en

Have you ever wondered why the name is written either as Wet'suwet'en or Witsuwit'en? It can be confusing to people both inside and outside the community. The Office of the Wet'suwet'en has used Wet'suwet'en since the beginning of land claims.

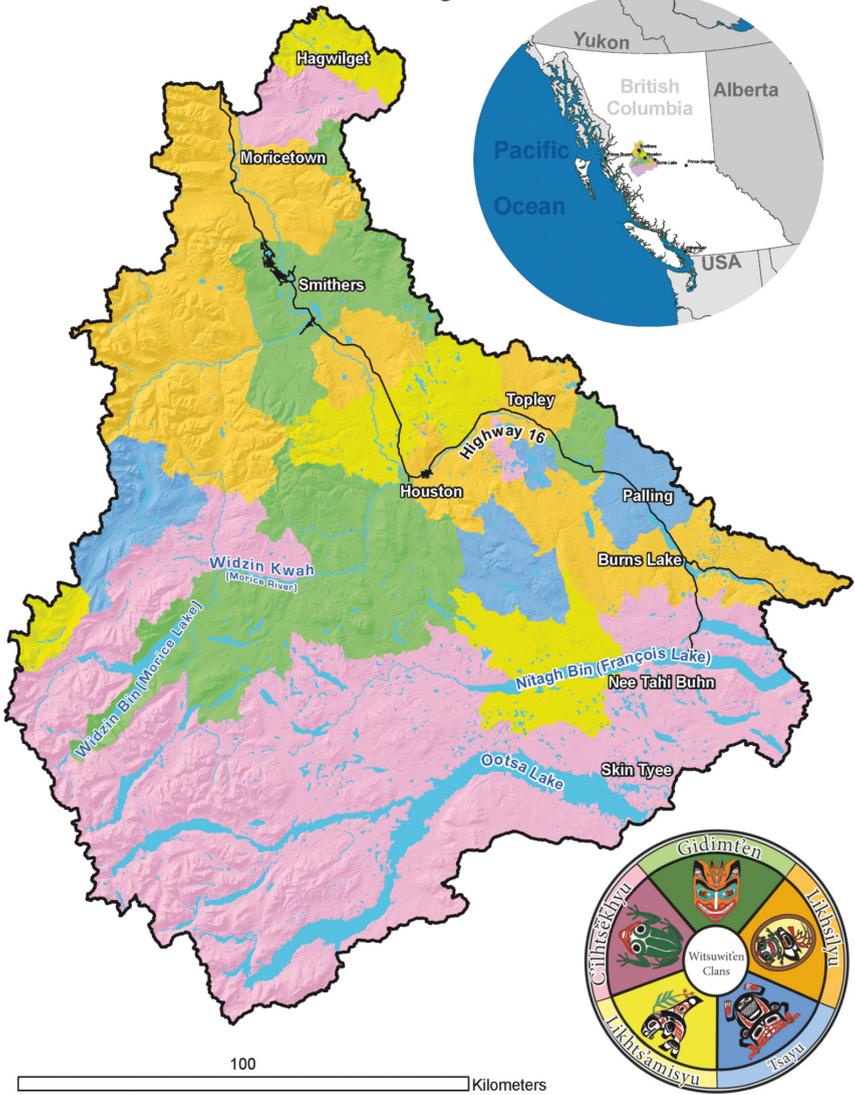


The Delgamuukw Gisdawya court case was the Gitksan and Witsuwit'en chiefs' first attempt at having Aboriginal rights over the traditional territory recognized by Canadian law. To do this, they had to write everything they knew about the land, culture and language. This was the first time Witsuwit'en people had to extensively record and write out the names of the chiefs, clans and place names on the territory. These words were written using the sounds available in the English alphabet.

The English alphabet, however, does not contain all the sounds of the Witsuwit'en alphabet. When

linguists started researching the language, they focused on the sounds. Since the 1980s, linguists have been recording many Witsuwit'en words and fine tuning an alphabet that is most appropriate to Witsuwit'en sounds. Linguist Sharon L. Hargus reworked the Hildebrandt writing systems. In 1993, Hargus presented the writing system to the Wet'suwet'en hereditary chiefs and the Witsuwit'en Language and Culture Authority for approval. Therefore, the Office of the Wet'suwet'en keeps the Hildebrandt spelling. For all other purposes, the correct spelling is Witsuwit'en.

Witsuwit'en Territory



Why the need for this booklet?

The main purpose of this information booklet is to provide community members with a protocol that respectfully acknowledges the traditional Witsuwit'en territories (*yin tah*) when hosting events. This protocol serves to acknowledge the importance of our shared sense of space and place and to recognize the spirit of the land. We are bringing history to life. We remain on Witsuwit'en territories that were never ceded through treaty, war or surrender. Our shared sense of place provides an educational opportunity to connect and celebrate our relationship to the land.

Who can use this protocol?

The protocol is for community event organizers, local organizations and those facilitating meetings that are held anywhere on Witsuwit'en territories. This booklet serves as a guide to respectfully acknowledge the territories in a way that has been in existence since time immemorial. The map (pg. 4) helps visitors identify which clan's territory they are meeting on. When you welcome people to the town of Smithers, you are welcoming them to Witsuwit'en territory belonging to the Gidimt'en clan.

Sometimes there is confusion about whether a non-Witsuwit'en person can perform such an acknowledgement or whether a hereditary chief needs to be present when acknowledging the territory. For small meetings held within organizations, it is recommended that the facilitator provide an acknowledgement outlined within this booklet. This should be done first and foremost. If you forget to acknowledge the lands immediately, do it as soon as possible and then carry on with the agenda.

For a larger community event, a chief should provide a welcome to the territory. To make arrangements for a chief to welcome guests for a community event, call the Office of the Wet'suwet'en at 250-847-3630 or the Learner Support Centre at 250-847-5517. Please be prepared to pay an honourarium when a chief attends your event.

Acknowledging Witsuwit'en territory: A Speaking guide

It is customary between one First Nation and another to acknowledge the host First Nation and its traditional territory at the outset of any meeting. Through the long struggle of colonialism, this basic Indigenous protocol has survived.

As a visitor to First Nations' lands, the best way to show respect is through following this protocol and beginning any gathering or meeting with acknowledgment of the traditional lands. In this way, you are acknowledging that the nation has had a relationship since time immemorial with the land you are standing on; it is a sign of respect and recognition.

We often take for granted the privilege of residing on lands that were occupied by Indigenous peoples long before Canada came into existence. In general, we were not taught to be aware of the Indigenous histories on these lands and the impact settlers had on Indigenous peoples and communities. Acknowledging the territory is one step towards learning the history of this land and, for those who are non-Indigenous, recognizing our responsibilities as Canadians.

Often people worry that acknowledgements are tokenistic or inauthentic, so consider this to help complete your story of why this step is important to you: If you plan to open your event by acknowledging the territory, it is important to know why you are doing it — what it means to you. Take some time before meeting to reflect on why it is important to you. We each have our own unique stories and reasons for wanting to do this. Ask yourself:

- 1. How does an awareness of Indigenous histories on the territories on which I reside affect the way I think and feel about my relationship to the land?**
- 2. What questions and thoughts would I like to trigger in the audience by acknowledging Indigenous territory?**

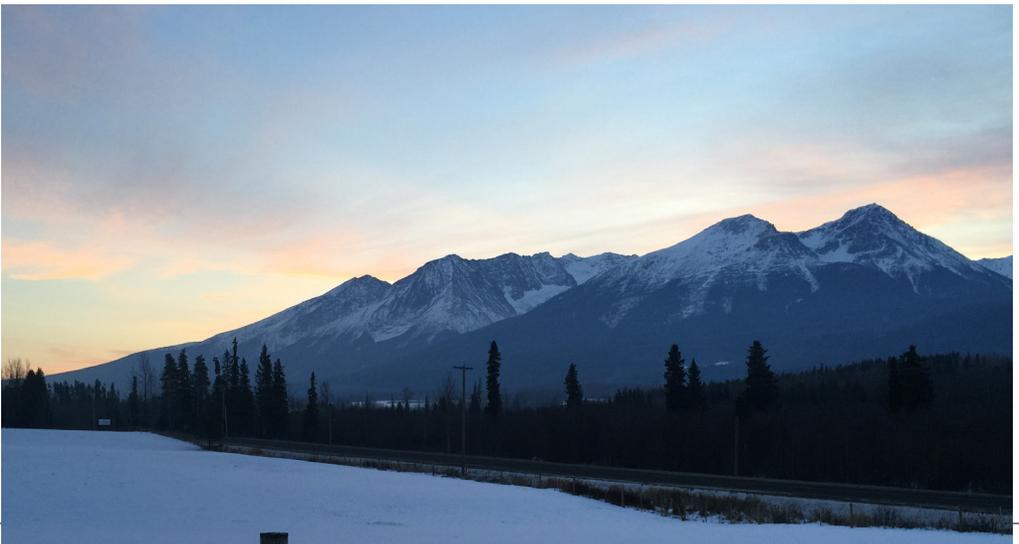
The suggestions within this booklet are not the only ways to do an acknowledgment — they can be used as a guide to

create your own. It is important that whatever words you choose, that you use language that is authentic and reflects you, so that it will feel comfortable and natural. Remember that a welcome to the territory can only be offered by the First Nations people who are traditionally from the territory. Visitors, including everyone who is not a member of the traditional First Nation, would instead acknowledge the territory.

Keep in mind that all First Nations are different and their traditions reflect this. The Coast Salish peoples of southern British Columbia prefer acknowledgements that are specific to the families. The University of Victoria acknowledges that they work as visitors on the traditional territory of the WS'ANEC' (Saanich), Lkwungen (Songhees), Wyomilth (Esquimalt) peoples of the Coast Salish Nation.

If you are unaware of the traditional lands on which the gathering or meeting will be held, reach out to the venue, a local Friendship Centre or the local First Nation's administrative offices. Some areas have more than one First Nation and some lands are shared territory.

Observing these practices connects participants with the traditional territory and provides a welcoming atmosphere and spiritual presence to the land upon which people are meeting. It also reinforces the place of Aboriginal perspectives within policies and procedures.



Traditional acknowledgments before a meeting

“Before we begin, I would like to acknowledge that we are gathered here today on unceded (____clan) territory, home of the Witsuwit’en Nation. It is important for me to acknowledge this because _____.”

Smithers opening: Gidimt’en-Bear Wolf Clan, on behalf of Chief Wos, a chief position that is currently vacant.

Houston opening: LikhsilyuSmall Frog Clan, on behalf of Chief Ut’akhkwi’ts, a chief position that is currently vacant.

Morictown: Likhsilyu-Small Frog Clan, on behalf of Chief Ut’akhgit, Mr. Henry Alfred.

Example of a school welcome by a Gidimt’en student

At Smithers Secondary School, Gidimt’en students can provide a welcome in the following way:

“Hadih Dini ze’ ts’ake, ski ze. As a Gidimt’en clan member, I would like to welcome you on behalf of the Gidimt’en clan to Witsuwit’en territory. It is part of Witsuwit’en custom to know the place and its history. This school is on Wos (Smithers & Telkwa) unceded territory. My ancestors have lived here for thousands of years. Missiyh’. Thank you.”

Across the province, you will hear people acknowledging different territories. The following information offers community members an example of a speaking protocol and acknowledgment from another territory in British Columbia.

“It is important for us to gain a collective understanding of the historical impacts, so that we will be able to walk forward together and create new memories.”

– BIRDY MARKERT, BRIDGING COMMITTEE CO-CHAIR

Other acknowledgement suggestions and examples

"I would like to thank the _____ for agreeing to meet with us today, and for welcoming us to your traditional territory."

"I would like to begin our day by acknowledging the _____ families and their traditional lands on which we begin our work today. I come from a place of respect and gratitude to know where I work, live, and learn in their traditional lands."

"I would like to acknowledge that we are on the traditional territory of the _____ First Nation."

"I would like to acknowledge the _____ people, whose land we are on."

"As a visitor, I want to acknowledge the traditional territory of the _____ people, whose land we are meeting on today."

"Before going further, I wish to acknowledge the ancestral, traditional and unceded Aboriginal territories of the _____."

* Taken from Acknowledging First Nations' Lands, written by Tasha Chamberlin, RSW, BSW, MSW candidate.

"I am blessed to be living on unceded Witsuwit'en territory. The Smithers Bridging Committee has provided diverse and enriching opportunities for me to learn about the people who have lived here since time immemorial; the culture, history and the impacts of colonization. Please join us as we listen, learn, walk and celebrate together."

– NANCY CODY, BRIDGING COMMITTEE CO-CHAIR

About Smithers Bridging Committee

Created as a subcommittee of the Smithers Social Planning Council, the Smithers Bridging Committee was formed in 2002 after it was identified that building relationships between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal peoples was the highest community priority.

The Smithers Bridging Committee created this information booklet as a resource for the community in response to questions from organizations and individuals desiring to build relationships across cultures, such as, “What is the proper protocol? What is the respectful thing to do? When and whom do you involve in welcoming people to the territory?”

This information booklet aims to create space for the general public to learn from the wisdom of the Witsuwit'en people. At the same time, it is a call to action for Canadians to educate themselves about how colonialism is part of Canada's history and not a relic of the past. Colonialism and its legacy reverberates in the present. Our educational work is guided by the notion that we can build bridges to understanding that impact and influence the current and future health, safety and well-being of community members.

Our vision

We see a vibrant, harmonious community that is respectful of the Witsuwit'en territory and the diversity of all nations and cultures that reside here. We appreciate that we are all connected and enrich ourselves by celebrating each other. We have the ability and responsibility to enhance the health of our community.

Our mission

The Smithers Bridging Committee supports and facilitates the sharing of cultures and the building of lasting relationships. We strive to create a welcoming and inclusive community between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal peoples in the Bulkley Valley. We do this through education, partnership, celebration, arts-based projects, dialogue and reflection.

What we do

The Smithers Bridging Committee takes an active role in furthering intercultural relations and positive place-based relationships between the Indigenous, the settler and the immigrant communities throughout the Bulkley Valley. We do this by hosting events, encouraging dialogue, building relationships and fostering critical conversations about racism, discrimination and settler responsibility, and through education about Canada's colonial past. We meet on a monthly basis and welcome new members to share and contribute their culture, along with their stories and experiences of being in community, and take action towards reconciliation and cross-cultural understanding on Witsuwit'en territory.

Important Bridging Committee milestones

Safe Harbour and Organizing Against Racism and Hate (OARH)

The Smithers Bridging Committee works with the Northwest Regional Organizing Against Racism and Hate (OARH) network and has promoted Safe Harbour, which is about a vision in action: increasing opportunities for businesses, institutions, agencies and municipalities to create more welcoming communities that support diversity and reject discrimination.

Festival of Nations

The Festival of Nations is a well-attended festival attracting upwards of 500 people each year that has served to create connectivity, dispel misunderstanding, and engage visitors in the Bulkley Valley's array of local cultures. The festival is often organized within the traditional feast format, with dances and foods from many cultures. Some festival partnerships have included Make Children First, the Moricetown Band and the Office of the Wet'suwet'en.



Creating cross-cultural harmony in Smithers

The Smithers Bridging Committee hosted and coordinated a dialogue forum inviting citizens and leaders from diverse cultural backgrounds to explore the following questions:

- What does cross-cultural harmony mean to you and to the community of Smithers?
- What can be done to create more meaningful connections between cultural groups in the community?
- What actions are we prepared to take individually and collectively to move these ideas into action?

Finding our Place: Stories in Movement Workshop

Dance workshops were facilitated with community members to explore movement, stories, place-based relationships and culture.

Finding our Way Documentary & Community Dialogue

This dialogue was launched with a screening of *Finding Our Way*, a 90-minute film exploring Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal relations in the Burns Lake area. Following the screening, participants formed smaller groups for a facilitated discussion on the film's content, particularly intercultural relations in the region, and ways to move forward in a spirit of community building and collaboration.

Speakers/book club

The Smithers Bridging Committee read *Unsettling the Settler Within* by Paulette Regan over a period of six months. The book is significant for anyone interested in reconciliation. In partnership with School District 54, the committee welcomed Richard Wagamese to the Bulkley Valley after reading *Indian Horse*. The purpose of his workshop was to address and acknowledge residential schools, as well as to inspire community members by using creative writing as a healing methodology.

A Celebration of Witsuwit'en History Display

An exhibit of Witsuwit'en history was on public display at Northwest Community College in Smithers. Other events that took place included a Taste of Nations cultural dinner and the Storytelling of Nations event.

Response to Racism

The Smithers Bridging Committee organized a one-day event called Invitation to Dialogue: Creating a process to respond to racism in the community of Smithers and surrounding area. The committee continues to develop Response to Racism events and records individual stories of racism with partner organizations in the communities of Moricetown and Smithers.

Supporting community groups doing bridging work

We strive to collaborate with and support other groups involved in bridging work. We provided funding to host the talk "What does justice look like?" by Dr. Waziyatawin, which was organized by Northwest Community College. We have provided funding for storytelling at Muheim Elementary School. Collaboration with the Town of Smithers resulted in a two-year summer student Aboriginal liaison office position.



The Smithers Bridging Committee is dedicated to the elimination of racism. We invite community members to contact us to report racism. We listen to stories in order to help with resolution in a supportive, confidential and safe space. Through education, dialogue, celebration and reflection, we have been building this bridge. Please contact us at: smithersbridgingcommittee@gmail.com 250-847-5517.



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